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By Mr. TOWN,

CRITIC and CENSOR-GENERAL.

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Μακάριοι οὐ κατὰ κόσμον.

ΗΟΜ.

Mr. *VILLAGE* to Mr. *TOWN*.

*Dear Cousin,*



THE country at present, no less than the metropolis, abounding with politicians of every kind, I begun to despair of picking up any intelligence, that might possibly be entertaining to your readers. However, I have made a tour to some

of the most distant parts of the kingdom with a clergyman of my acquaintance; and shall not trouble you with an account of the improvements that have been made in the seats we saw according to the modern taste, but proceed

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ceed to give you some reflections, which occurred to us on observing several country churches, and the behaviour of their congregations.

THE ruinous condition of some of these churches gave me great offence; and I could not help wishing, that the honest vicar, instead of indulging his genius for improvements, by inclosing his gooseberry bushes with a *Chinese* rail, and converting half an acre of his glebe-land into a bowling-green, would have applied part of his income to the more laudable purpose of sheltering his parishioners from the weather during their attendance on divine service. It is no uncommon thing to see the parsonage-house well thatched, and in exceeding good repair, while the church perhaps has no better roof than the ivy that grows over it. The noise of owls, bats and magpies makes a principal part of the church musick in many of these ancient edifices; and the walls, like a large map, seem to be portioned out into capes, seas, and promontories by the various colours with which the damp has stained them. Sometimes it has happened, that the foundation being too weak to support the steeple any longer, it has been found expedient to pull down that part of the building, and to hang the bells under a wooden shed on the ground beside it. This is the case in a parish in *Norfolk*, through which I lately passed, and where the clerk and the sexton, like the two figures at *St. Dunstan's*, serve the bells in capacity of clappers, by striking them alternately with a hammer.

IN other churches I have observed, that nothing unseemly or ruinous is to be found, except in the clergyman, and in the appendages of his person. The squire of the parish,

rish, or his ancestors perhaps, to testify their devotion, and leave a lasting monument of their magnificence, have adorned the altar-piece with the richest crimson velvet, embroidered with vine-leaves and ears of wheat, and have dressed up the pulpit with the same splendour and expence; while the gentleman who fills it is exalted in the midst of all this finery with a surplice as dirty as a farmer's frock, and a periwig that seems to have transferred its faculty of curling to the band, that appears in full-buckle beneath it,

BUT if I was concerned to see many of our country churches in a tottering condition, I was more offended with the indecency of worship in others. I could wish that the pastors would inform their hearers, that there is no occasion to scream themselves hoarse in making the responses, that the town-cryer is not the only person qualified to pray with due devotion, and that he who bawls the loudest may nevertheless be the wickedest fellow in the parish. The old women too in the ayle might be told that their time would be better employed in attending to the sermon, than in fumbling over their tattered testaments till they have found the text, by which time the discourse is near drawing to a conclusion; while a word or two of instruction might not be thrown away upon the younger part of the congregation to teach them, that making posies in summer-time, and cracking nuts in autumn, is no part of the religious ceremony.

THE good old practice of psalm-singing is, indeed, wonderfully improved in many country churches since the days of *Sternhold* and *Hopkins*; and there is scarce a  
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parish-clerk, who has so little taste as not to pick his staves out of the New Version. This has occasioned great complaints in some places, where the clerk has been forced to bawl by himself, because the rest of the congregation cannot find the psalm at the end of their prayer-books; while others are highly disgusted at the innovation, and stick as obstinately to the Old Version as to the Old Style. The tunes themselves have also been new-set to jiggyish measures; and the sober drawl, which used to accompany the two first staves of the hundredth psalm with the *gloria patri*, is now split into as many quavers as an *Italian* air. For this purpose there is in every county an itinerant band of vocal musicians, who make it their business to go round to all the churches in their turns, and, after a prelude with the pitch-pipe, astonish the audience with hymns set to the new *Winchester* measure and anthems of their own composing. As these new-fashioned psalmodists are necessarily made up of young men and maids, we may naturally suppose, that there is a perfect concord and symphony between them: and, indeed, I have known it happen, that these sweet fingers have been brought more than once into disgrace, by too close an unison between the thorough-bass and the treble.

It is a difficult matter to decide, which is looked upon to be the greatest man in a country church, the parson or his clerk. The latter is most certainly held in higher veneration, where the former happens to be only a poor curate, who rides post every sabbath from village to village, and mounts and dismounts at the church-door. The clerk's office is not only to tag the prayers with an *Amen*, or usher in the sermon with a staff; but he is also the universal father

father to give away the brides, and the standing godfather to all the new-born brats. But in many places there is a still greater man belonging to the church, than either the parson or the clerk himself. The person I mean is the squire; who, like the King, may be stiled Head of the Church in his own parish. If the benefice be in his own gift, the vicar is his creature, and of consequence entirely at his devotion: or, if the care of the church is left to a curate, the Sunday fees of roast beef and plumb pudding, and a liberty to shoot in the manor, will bring him as much under the squire's command as his dogs and horses. For this reason the bell is often kept tolling, and the people waiting in the church-yard, an hour longer than the usual time; nor must the service begin, till the squire has strutted up the aisle, and seated himself in the great pew in the chancel. The length of the sermon is also measured by the will of the squire, as formerly by the hour-glass: and I know one parish where the preacher has always the complaisance to break off to a conclusion, the minute that the squire gives the signal by rising up after his nap.

IN a village church, the squire's lady or the vicar's wife are perhaps the only females that are stared at for their finery: but in the larger cities and towns, where the newest fashions are brought down weekly by the stage-coach or waggon, all the wives and daughters of the most topping tradesmen vie with each other every Sunday in the elegance of their apparel. I could even trace the gradations in their dress according to the opulence, the extent, and the distance of the place from *London*. I was at church in a populous city in the north, where the mace-bearer cleared the way for Mrs. Mayores,



who came sidling after him in an enormous fan-hoop, of a pattern which had never been seen before in those parts. At another church in a corporation-town, I saw several Negligeès, with furbelow'd aprons, which had long disputed the prize of superiority: but these were most woefully eclipsed by a burges's daughter just come from *London*, who appeared in a Trolloppeè or Slammerkin, with treble ruffles to the cuffs, pinked and gyped, and the sides of the petticoat drawn up in festoons. In some lesser borough towns the contest, I found, lay between three or four black and green bibs and aprons: at one a grocer's wife attracted our eyes by a new-fashioned cap called a Joan; and at another they were wholly taken up by a mercer's daughter in a Nun's Hood.

I NEED not say any thing of the behaviour of the congregations in these more polite places of religious resort; as the same genteel ceremonies are practised there as at the most fashionable churches at the court end of the town. The ladies immediately on their entrance breathe a pious ejaculation through their fan-sticks, and the beaus very gravely address themselves to the Haberdashers' Bills glewed upon the linings of their hats. This pious duty is no sooner performed, than the exercise of bowing and curtsying succeeds; the locking and unlocking of the pews drowns the reader's voice at the beginning of the service, and the rustling of silks, added to the whispering and tittering of so much good company, renders him totally unintelligible to the very end of it.

*I am, dear Cousin, yours, &c.*

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